

WEARING THE BIBLE AN EARLY CHRISTIAN TUNIC WITH NEW TESTAMENT SCENES*

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An impressive number of textiles from early Christian Egypt survives in museums and private collections both in the United States and abroad¹. In the late nineteenth century, archaeologists from Europe excavated the fertile land of Egypt looking for Pharaonic antiquities. More often than not, they also unearthed vestiges of a little known art from another period: tunics, shawls, cloaks, headdresses, hangings, and curtains, all products of the textile industry that flourished in the area in the late antique period and the middle ages. Their preservation is due to the extremely dry climate and the desert sand, which also allowed for the survival of other delicate materials such as wood and leather. Almost all of the existing Egyptian textiles come from cemeteries located, by Roman law, outside the urban centers. The custom of mummifying and placing the body in a sarcophagus was abandoned after the third century. Instead, the dead were buried directly in the ground, without even a coffin, merely placed on a wooden board, the head resting on a cushion. They were however fully dressed and sometimes covered with a veil and wrapped in a shroud. Often rags or a hanging were used to support the body. A tablet provided information about the name and the social status of the deceased.

The dating of textiles found in such contexts is a difficult task. Methods of excavation and record keeping in the beginning of the nineteenth century were often careless; more-over textiles wrapped around bodies were less appealing to archaeologists than mummies surrounded by precious vessels. Furthermore, the rising demand for Egyptian textiles in the Western world gave rise to treasure hunters, who very often kept

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¹ For an introduction to Coptic art and culture see selectively Badawy, *Coptic Art and Archaeology*; Friedman, *Beyond the Pharaohs*; Buschhausen, *Der Lebenskreis der Kopten*; Rutgers, "Spuren"; *The World of Early Egyptian Christianity*. Washington, D.C. 2007.

only the pieces suitable for the art market, discarding undecorated, damaged, or stained parts. Smaller pieces were also easier to smuggle out of the country. As a result, most of these textiles come with no information about their context, not to mention that very rarely is the site of provenance known. Thus, the dating of Egyptian textiles is mainly based on stylistic comparisons with the scarce securely-dated examples, often presuming an artistic evolution from naturalism in late antique centuries to abstraction in the early middle ages.

The richness of the decoration of Egyptian textiles is equally impressive². It is a product of intermingling civilizations, an expression of the cultural diversity of Egypt at the time of their production. Joyous Bacchic scenes from the Greco-Roman repertoire, motifs of abundance and well-being associated with the Nile, and even the story of Joseph. The early Christian population of Egypt inherited a mixed tradition, laden with Greek, Roman, and pre-Christian images, which was woven in every thread of everyday life, from tunics to pottery, from utensils to lamps³.

In contrast to the aforementioned themes, scenes inspired from the narratives of the New Testament rarely decorate Egyptian textiles⁴. This study focuses on the most complete known example of this small, but exceptionally interesting group: a tunic now at the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago (Pl. 16), which, based primarily on stylistic considerations, Henry Maguire has dated to the seventh or eighth century⁵. Although this textile has been known to scholars for some time⁶, it has not received the attention it deserves. This paper is the first to examine the Field Museum tunic in its totality. Its goal is twofold: first, to decipher the scenes included in the tunic and place it in the context of early Christian art; second, to analyze the garment's function as revealed by its iconography. I argue that the tunic had a distinctively pro-

² See selectively Kendrick, *Catalogue of Textiles; Art of the Ancient Weaver*; Baginski, *Textiles from Egypt*; Stauffer, *Textiles d'Égypte*; Stauffer, *Late Antiquity*; Dauterman Maguire, *Rich Life*; Durand/Saragoza, *Égypte*. Monseio Benaki, Koptika hyphasmata. Athens 1971.

³ Dauterman Maguire, *Art and Holy Powers*, passim.

⁴ One of the most systematic approaches of the subject is by Abd el-Malek, *Joseph Tapestries*, 161-191. The corpus has significantly grown since then, although many collections of Egyptian textiles remain unpublished. Pieces unknown to Abd el-Malek will be mentioned throughout the article. See also Davis, "Divine Body", 336-348 for a brief survey of similar textiles.

⁵ Date proposed by Maguire, "Garments", 220. For a discussion of the dates of related textiles with Biblical subjects see Abd el-Malek, *Joseph Tapestries*.

⁶ The tunic was first noted and briefly described by Dauterman Maguire, *Art and Holy Powers*, 31-32, figs. 28-29. See also Maguire, "Magic", 57-59, figs. 16-19; Maguire, "Garments", 220, figs. 25-26.

phylactic and talismanic character. More specifically, I will suggest that the tunic belonged to a woman and expresses either her desire to bear children or her gratitude for having them.

The iconographic themes in the tunic are found in other media in early Christian art, from ivories and household objects to painted or mosaic decoration. They include the Nativity, the Adoration of the Magi, the Baptism, as well as representations of Christ, the Virgin, and Saints. The red-ground roundels, clavus strips, and sleeve bands, in which the scenes are woven, are still attached to fragments of a linen tunic, which they once decorated. All these appliqués are woven in a tapestry weave on plied linen warps with colored woolen weft yarns. The style of the scenes is markedly flat, abstract, and schematic. The figures are strongly outlined with a black contour, have distorted proportions and exaggerated facial expressions. Two traits particularly stand out: the prominence of the round large eyes of the figures and the rich colorism of the compositions. The crimson background is accompanied with various hues of blue in the garments of the figures, along with yellow, red, green, and even pink. The visual effect is not only pleasant but also stunning in its variety and resourcefulness.

Although the scenes generally follow the well-established norms of early Christian iconography, they also present significant divergence from them, imposed in part by the medium. The compositions had to fit in a very restricted space, either a roundel, a sleeve band, or a clavus. Usually, only the essential parts of each episode are included, frequently in a very abbreviated form. Sometimes scenes are juxtaposed or even intermingled with each other. These factors, in combination with the abstraction of style make identifications difficult. On the other hand, it should be noted that abbreviated scenes, juxtaposed with one another in an empty background with no connecting links are not unusual in early Christian art, especially sarcophagi⁷.

Six roundels, two clavi strips, and one sleeve band survive from the original decoration of the tunic in various degrees of conservation. Three persons, overlapping each other, are enclosed in roundel A (Pl. 17, Fig. 1). The one in the middle wears a blue garment and has a very elaborate haircut, while the one on the left has a grey garment decorated with white dots. The figure on the right, dressed in a yellow tunic adorned with black dots points with his left hand towards the sky. The three per-

⁷ These have been called "staccato" images in Grabar, *Iconography*, 5-54; Kitzinger, *Byzantine Art*, 20. On the subject see Dinkler, "Representations", 396-402; Mathews, *Clash of Gods*, 12-13.

sons seem to be seated in an object that resembles a sled. The same is repeated in the badly damaged roundel **B**. This scene depicts of the Three Magi, who travel towards Bethlehem, following the star. On the 'Dogmatic' sarcophagus, now in the Vatican, the Three Magi bring their offerings to Christ and one of them points towards the sky, in a way very similar to that in the roundels⁸. A related representation can be found in a fifth-century ivory, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum⁹. Gary Vikan has suggested that the popularity of the subject was due to the Magi being seen as protectors of pilgrims and travelers¹⁰.

The figure of the Christ-child, identified by his cruciform nimbus, is depicted in the middle of roundel **F** (Pl. 17, Fig. 2). Christ is flanked by two persons. The one on Christ's right wears a yellow garment with a blue spot and has a green halo; he or she makes a gesture of speech with the left hand. The other person wears a blue garment and blue trousers. A head with four wings is seen above Christ, and a vegetal motif underneath him. The scene is repeated in roundel **E**, which is partially destroyed, and roundel **D**, the latter having slight differences in the coloration. A similar scene is found in roundels from the former Museum of the Decorative Arts in Athens (now Museum of Folk Art)¹¹, the Staatliche Museen in Berlin¹², in the State Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg¹³, and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts¹⁴ and has been interpreted as either the Nativity¹⁵ or the Baptism¹⁶. In the examples from the Field Museum the Christ-child is swaddled rather than being baptized naked in the river Jordan. This is more obvious in roundel **F**, where the swaddling clothes are red and white. Furthermore, the similar roundel from the Boston Museum of Fine Arts depicts a few diagonal lines on Christ's garment, probably indicating the swaddling clothes¹⁷. Were this

⁸ Kitzinger, *Byzantine Art*, fig. 41. The sarcophagus dates to ca. 320-330. A very similar configuration is found in a sarcophagus with Old and New Testament scenes now in Musée Réattu in Arles (ca. 330), see Weitzmann, *Age of Spirituality*, 400, fig. 56.

⁹ Volbach, *Elfenbeinarbeiten*, 83, cat. no. 118.

¹⁰ Vikan, "Pilgrims in Magi clothing", 103-106. Mathews offers a rather eccentric reason for the popularity of this scene suggesting that the Adoration of the Magi asserts the claim that Christ was a super-magician, see Mathews, *Clash of Gods*, 79-86.

¹¹ Apostolaki, *Koptika*, 150.

¹² Wulff/Volbach, *Koptische Stoffe*, pl. 101.

¹³ Sokrovisha Koptskoj Kollekcij Gosudarstvennogo Ermitazka, St Petersburg 2004, cat. no. 211.

¹⁴ Abd el-Malek, *Joseph Tapestries*, 164.

¹⁵ Wulff/Volbach, *Koptische Stoffe*, 92-93; Apostolaki, *Koptika*, 150. See also Abd el-Malek, *Joseph Tapestries*, 165.

¹⁶ Maguire, "Garments", 220.

¹⁷ Abd el-Malek, *Joseph Tapestries*, 165-166.

a representation of the Baptism, the head with the wings could be the Holy Spirit. Here, it is rather an abbreviated figure of an angel, who, due to the lack of space, could not be depicted entirely, or is meant to be behind Christ. A choir of angels was included in representations of the Nativity probably after the ninth century¹⁸, although in a possibly eighth-century band now in the Louvre angels are present in the scene¹⁹. Similarly, an angel appears in the Nativity in a fifth century linen textile from the Victoria and Albert Museum²⁰. Furthermore, the Annunciation to the Shepherds is sometimes closely juxtaposed to the Nativity in early Christian art. Such is the case, for example, in the Nativity fresco at Castelserpio probably dating to the eighth century²¹. The two persons that flank Christ are also difficult to interpret since they do not bear any distinctive characteristics²². The haloed figure may be the Virgin and the one on the right may be a shepherd or Joseph, who sometimes is depicted without a halo²³.

Several scenes are squeezed into the two clavus strips, both of which survive only in part, the one on the left being more complete²⁴. Starting from the upper part of the left-hand clavus strip (G) we have the Visitation (Pl. 17, Fig. 3). The two women, the Virgin and Elisabeth, are embracing each other. They both have halos. The woman on the right wears a yellow garment while, the one on the left has a blue one. The depiction of the Visitation is frequent in textiles, such as roundels in the Victoria and Albert Museum²⁵ and in the former Museum of Decorative Arts in

¹⁸ Kazhdan, *Oxford Dictionary*, s.v. "Nativity". See also Evans/Wixom, *Glory of Byzantium*, cat. no. 91. For the scene of the Nativity in general see Lafontaine-Dosogne, "Les représentations", 11-21; Weitzmann, "Loca Sancta", 36-39.

¹⁹ Bourguet, *Catalogue*, cat. no. E67.

²⁰ Weitzmann, *Age of Spirituality*, cat. no. 392. In this case, however, it might be a conflation of two scenes, Annunciation and Nativity.

²¹ Weitzmann, *Fresco Cycle*, 57, fig. 5. Weitzmann suggested a tenth-century date for the frescoes. A date to ca. 720 was proposed by Wright, "Sources". Radiocarbon analysis of the original roof beams suggests a date between 778/808 and 952, see Leveto-Jabr, "Carbon-14", 17-18.

²² Wulff and Volbach commenting on a similar roundel from the Staatlichen Museen in Berlin, propose erroneously that the central figure is the Virgin, who is flanked by Salome and a shepherd, see Wulff/Volbach, *Koptische Stoffe*, 92-93, pl. 101. However, the identification of the figure with the hand with Salome is not unlikely, as it appears in other textiles, see for example, Bourguet, *Catalogue*, cat. no. E67. Sometimes the same is identified as the washing of Christ, see Sokrovisha Koptskoj Kollekcij, no. 211.

²³ Evans/Wixom, *Glory of Byzantium*, cat. nos. 34, 91; Weitzmann, *Fresco Cycle*, fig. 5.

²⁴ An almost identical clavus is found at the State Hermitage Museum, see Sokrovisha Koptskoj Kollekcij, cat. no. 213.

²⁵ Kendrick, *Catalogue of Textiles*, vol. III, pl. 15:715.

Athens²⁶, and in a clavus fragment in Berlin²⁷ as well as in other media, including manuscript illumination, rings, monumental painting, medallions and ampullae²⁸.

Below the Visitation is a representation of the Baptism (**H**), (Pl. 17, Fig. 3) abbreviated in composition to fit within the narrow space of the clavus band. Saint John the Baptist wears a green tunic and a pink *himation* and is putting his left hand on the head of Christ who is represented as a naked child, with a cruciform halo. This depiction follows early Christian representations of the Baptism, such as in an ivory now in the Staatlichen Museen in Berlin, dated to the first half of the fifth century²⁹. During the same period Christ was often represented without a beard.

An abbreviated version of the Nativity (**I**) follows (Pl. 17, Fig. 4). The naked Christ-child lies in a crib adorned with a checkerboard pattern. He is flanked by the heads of an ox and an ass, as is usual in early, pre-sixth century representation of the subject³⁰. A similarly abbreviated representation is found on a sixth-century silk band now at the Metropolitan Museum and in a silk from the Abegg Stiftung³¹. The scene is also common in other media such as on the front faces of a pair of a mid fifth- or sixth-century gold medallions, now in the Istanbul Archaeological Museum³², and in a fifth-century ivory in Nevers³³.

Standing figures wearing polychrome garments are represented in both clavus strips (**J**, **N**) (Pl. 17, Fig. 4; Pl. 18, Fig. 3). Their busts are repeated in the lower part of the left-hand clavus (**L**), each with a cross on the chest. It seems that they wear colored bonnets and in both the left hand is visible. The same figures are repeated in the corresponding part of the right-hand clavus strip (**N**) (in the upper part of the right-hand clavus (**M**) the feet of two figures survive), and possibly their busts in the lower part of the left-hand clavus (**L**), this time each having a cross on the chest (Pl. 16). Even though they do not have haloes, they may be saints, since all the other scenes are of Christian character.

A haloed figure, probably female, wearing a blue dress (**O**) is situated below the two saints in the right-hand clavus (Pl. 18, Fig. 3). The textile

²⁶ Apostolaki, *Koptika*, 151.

²⁷ Wulff/Volbach, *Koptische Stoffe*, 87, pl. 96.

²⁸ Abd el-Malek, *Joseph Tapestries*, 163. Van Dijk, "Salutation", 425-426, fig. 9; Vikan, "Art", 157-161, fig. 26.

²⁹ See also Kitzinger, *Byzantine Art*, pl. 84.

³⁰ Kazhdan, *Oxford Dictionary*. s.v. "Nativity".

³¹ Flury-Lemberg, *Textile Conservation*, 367-383.

³² Van Dijk, "Salutation," 425-426, fig. 9.

³³ Volbach, *Elfenbeinarbeiten*, 80-81, cat. no. 114.

is very worn out, but it is likely a representation of the Virgin, maybe in orans position. Portrayals of the Virgin appear in textiles, for example in a tapestry woven stole in the Worcester Art Museum³⁴. In a linen tapestry weave, now in Prague, a woman is depicted in the orant pose³⁵. A depiction of the orant Virgin among archangels and saints is found in the exquisite drape now in the Musée d'art et d'histoire in Geneva³⁶.

Another haloed saint is depicted in the lower, round part of the right-hand clavus strip (**P**) (Pl. 18, Fig. 3). He has a halo and wears a blue garment with white dots, resembling Saint John the Baptist who is depicted in the left-hand clavus band (**H**).

Depictions of single saints are often present in Early Christian domestic art and can be found in various media, including, textiles³⁷, ceramic bowls, spoons and ampullae³⁸. It seems that they were thought to possess apotropaic and protective powers similar to the cross and other protective designs such as knots and interlaces.

A representation of Christ in bust form (**K**) is situated below the two saints (Pl. 18, Fig. 1). He blesses with his left hand and holds what is perhaps a scroll with his right. This is a typical representation of Christ, a type known from earlier examples such as a mid sixth-century ivory with Christ from Berlin³⁹. The depiction in the Chicago tunic is also very similar to the famous sixth-century icon of Christ from Sinai⁴⁰.

The scenes in the right-hand sleeve band are symmetrically arranged around a central and rather curious representation of the Baptism (**S**) (Pl. 18, Fig. 2). What is probably an angel is situated on the right, wearing a yellow tunic and a blue cloak. He holds an object above the head of a smaller figure with a cruciform nimbus, obviously Christ. His hands extended, Christ stands in the river Jordan, depicted as a small mound, with white curvilinear lines denoting the waves. Although difficult to read, above the head of Christ is presumably the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove, descending from the green-colored Heaven.

The Baptism of Christ was represented at least from the third century on and acquired its standard configuration by the sixth, including Christ,

³⁴ Maguire, "Garments," 219.

³⁵ Maguire, "Garments," 219.

³⁶ Martiniani-Reber, *Tissus coptes*, cat. no. 186.

³⁷ Dauterman Maguire, *Rich Life*, cat. nos. C26, C27, C29-30. Apostolaki, *Koptika*, 159.

³⁸ Dauterman Maguire, *Art and Holy Powers*, cat. nos. 60 and 130 (for the bowl and the ampulla) and fig. 21 (for the spoon).

³⁹ Volbach, *Elfenbeinarbeiten*, 80-81, cat. no. 112.

⁴⁰ Weitzmann, *Monastery*, 13-15, pl. XXXIX.

John the Baptist, angels, the Holy Spirit as a dove descending in a light-burst from above, and the personification of the river Jordan⁴¹. The angels sometimes hold a cloth, as for example in a sixth-century ivory now at the British Museum⁴². In our representation St. John is curiously omitted or replaced by the angel, who looks like he is the one who baptizes Christ. This is probably another example of a misinterpretation of the motif by the weaver as well as of the effort to adjust a scene into a restricted space. Similar representations survive in two other sleeve bands, one in the Abegg Stiftung⁴³ and the other in Brussels⁴⁴. In the center there is the baptism scene, which is flanked by figures extending their hands in proclamation. Curiously in the sleeve band from Brussels both the one who baptises and the one who is being baptised bear a cruciform halo. Two figures with a cruciform nimbus are present also in the Abegg Stiftung textile, the baptised and the one next to the baptiser. These two compositions do not help in the interpretation of our scene. They may be a rare representation of Christ baptising (the event is described in John 3) or a ritual of Egyptian Gnostic, the fire baptism⁴⁵.

Flanking the scene of the Baptism of Christ are two figures that face each other (**R1**, **R2**) (Pl. 18, Fig. 2). On the right, Christ with a cruciform nimbus holds a scroll (?) with his right hand and makes a gesture of speech with his left. On the left, a haloed woman with a blue garment stares at Christ. The scene represented here is probably the encounter of Christ with the Samaritan woman, a subject which can be found in Early Christian iconography⁴⁶. 'Conversing' persons are not rare in Egyptian textiles, although none of the parallels cited here is close enough to the Field Museum Tunic⁴⁷.

A rather peculiar scene adorns the edges of the sleeve band (**Q** and **T**) (Pl. 19) and is repeated in the remaining part of the left-hand sleeve (**C**). The seated Virgin, wearing a red garment, holds Christ in her lap. Another figure, possibly one of the Magi, stands in front of her and seems to be presenting to her an unidentifiable object. In **Q** a head is situated

⁴¹ Kazhdan, *Oxford Dictionary*, s.v. "Baptism". An early example of this configuration can be found in the the 6th-century Cathedra of Maximian in Ravenna, see Jurgensen, *Stile*.

⁴² Dalton, *Catalogue*, 53, cat. no. 294; Volbach, *Elfenbeinarbeiten*, 94, cat. no. 141. Meyer, *Ancient Christian Magic*, 63-65.

⁴³ Stauffer, *Wirkereien*, cat. no. 70.

⁴⁴ Lafontaine-Dosogne, *Textiles Coptes*, cat. no. 73.

⁴⁵ Meyer, *Ancient Christian Magic*, 63-65.

⁴⁶ As it is the case in the Cathedra of Maximian.

⁴⁷ Martiniani-Reber, *Tissus coptes*, cat. nos. 231, 404.

between the Virgin and the Magus whereas in **T** it is substituted by a bird's head⁴⁸. The corresponding portion of band (**C**) is missing.

As mentioned above, the Adoration of the Magi is one of the most popular themes in early Christian art. This theme was common in textile decoration. It is represented in the luxurious cloak worn by Empress Theodora in the church of San Vitale in Ravenna, in the band from the Metropolitan Museum, and in a linen fragment from the Cleveland Museum of Art⁴⁹. The scene in the tunic from the Field Museum is again compressed and instead of three only one Magus is represented. The curious head in **Q** is perhaps an abbreviated version of a figure, a second Magus, who could not fit in the available space. Also, sometimes in textile representations of the Adoration, the Magi bring sometimes ducks instead of the usual gifts⁵⁰. That may explain the bird's head on the other side of the sleeve band. Birds of that kind are very common motifs in textiles from Egypt, as they represent the Nile and its fertility.

How can one interpret this curious iconography? Tunics, such as the one in the Field Museum, were objects of everyday use. Therefore, their iconography should be understood in the context of the imagery of the early Christian home. The selection of subjects on the tunic is similar to that which appears on sixth- and seventh-century jewelry, amulets, pendants and other objects typical of an early Christian household⁵¹, even though it also corresponds in a very general way with the 'official' iconography of monumental art. The goal of these objects' decoration, however, is quite different from the goal of monumental art. Saints, miracles, and biblical subjects, including scenes from the life of Joseph, appearing on these weavings were rather designed to function as amulets or charms to protect and bring happiness to the bearers. In the words of Henry and Eunice Maguire they 'intend to play an important role in the world of spirits and demons, a world which, to the Early Christian, was ultimately more real and potentially more threatening than the material world.'⁵² Selectivity and repetition are significant characteristics: only the most potent elements of the story are included and the scenes are repeated as magic words are in magic spells of the period.

The textual evidence also indicates the protective and amuletic character of these scenes. An often-quoted text written by Asterius, bishop of Amaseia (d. ca. 410) states:

⁴⁸ What is in the same part of roundel C is not visible.

⁴⁹ Weitzmann, *Age of Spirituality*, cat. no. 390.

⁵⁰ For parallels see Apostolaki, *Koptika*, 149-150.

⁵¹ Dauterman Maguire, *Art and Holy Powers*, passim.

⁵² Dauterman Maguire, *Art and Holy Powers*, 31.

Then there are others whose mind is addicted to the same vanity — nay, who practice greater wickedness by not confining their stupid ideas to the above limits. They have invented some kind of vain and curious broiery which, by means of the interweaving of warp and woof, imitates the quality of painting and represents upon garments the forms of all kinds of living beings, and so they devise for themselves, their wives and children gay-colored dresses decorated with thousands of figures — When they come out in public dressed in this fashion, they appear like painted walls to those they meet. They are surrounded by children who laugh among themselves and point their fingers at the pictures on the garments... You may see lions and leopards, bears, bulls and dogs, forests and rocks, hunters and [in short] the whole repertory of painting that imitates nature... The more religious among rich men and women, having picked out the sory of the Gospels, have handed it over to the weavers. I mean our Christ together with all His disciples, and each one of the miracles the way it is related. You may see the wedding of Galilee with the water jars, the paralytic carrying his bed on his shoulders, the blind man healed by means of clay, the woman with an issue of blood seizing [Christ's] hem, the sinful woman falling at the feet of Jesus, Lazarus coming back to life from his tomb. In doing this they consider themselves to be religious and to be wearing clothes that are agreeable to God. If they accepted my advice, they would sell those clothes and honor instead the living images of God. Do not depict Christ (for that one act of humility, the incarnation, which he willingly accepted for our sake is sufficient unto Him), but bear in your spirit and carry about with you the incorporeal Logos. Do not display the paralytic on your garments, but seek out him who lies ill in bed⁵³.

⁵³ “Ἄλλοι πάλιν κατὰ τὴν γνώμην τῆς ὁμοίας ματαιότητος ἐρασταὶ μᾶλλον δὲ πρὸς τὸ πλεόν τὴν κακίαν ἀσκήσαντες οὐδὲ μέχρι τῶν εἰρημένων ἔστησαν τῆς μωρᾶς ἐπινοίας τοὺς ὅρους, ἀλλὰ τινα κενὴν ὑφαντικὴν ἐξευρόντες <καὶ> περίεργον, ἥτις τῇ πλοκῇ τοῦ στήμονος πρὸς τὴν κρόκην τῆς γραφικῆς μιμεῖται τὴν δύναμιν καὶ πάντων ζώων τοῖς πέπλοις τὰς μορφὰς ἐνσημαίνεται, τὴν ἀνθὶνὴν καὶ μυρίοις εἰδώλοις πεποικιλμένην φιλοτεχνοῦσιν ἐσθῆτα ἑαυτοῖς τε καὶ γυναιξὶ καὶ παισὶν παίζοντες λοιπόν, οὐ σπουδάζοντες κατὰ τῆς ἀμετρίας τοῦ πλούτου παραχρῶμενοι τῷ βίῳ, οὐ χρώμενοι, ἀντινομοθετοῦντες τῷ Παύλῳ καὶ μαχόμενοι ταῖς θεοπνεύστοις φωναῖς, οὐ γράμμασιν ἀλλὰ πράγμασιν. Ἄ γὰρ ἐκεῖνος ἀπεκήρυξε λόγῳ, ταῦθ' οὗτοι κρατοῦσι καὶ κυροῦσι τοῖς ἔργοις. Ὅταν οὖν ἐνδυσάμενοι φανῶσιν, ὥς τοῖχοι γεγραμμένοι παρὰ τῶν συντυγχανόντων ὁρῶνται. Καὶ πού καὶ τὰ παιδία αὐτοὺς περιίστανται μειδιῶντα πρὸς ἄλληλα καὶ δακτυλοδεικτοῦντα τὴν ἐν τοῖς ἱματίοις γραφὴν βαδίζουσι δὲ παρεπόμενα, οὐκ ἀναχωροῦντα μέχρι πολλοῦ. Ἐκεῖ λέοντες καὶ παρδάλεις, ἄρκτοι καὶ ταῦροι καὶ κύνες· ὕλα καὶ πέτραι, καὶ ἄνδρες θηροκτόνοι καὶ πᾶσα ἡ τῆς γραφικῆς ἐπιτήδευσις μιμουμένη τὴν φύσιν. Ἐδεῖ γὰρ μὴ τοὺς τοίχους αὐτῶν μόνον, ὥς ἔοικεν, καὶ τὰς οἰκίας κοσμεῖσθαι, ἀλλ' ἤδη καὶ τοὺς χιτῶνας καὶ τὰ ἐπ' ἐκείνους ἱμάτια. Ὅσοι δὲ καὶ ὅσαι τῶν πλουτούντων εὐλαβέστεροι, ἀναλεξάμενοι τὴν εὐαγγελικὴν ἱστορίαν τοῖς ὑφανταῖς παρέδωκαν· αὐτὸν λέγω τὸν Χριστὸν ἡμῶν μετὰ τῶν μαθητῶν ἀπάντων, καὶ τῶν θαυμασίων ἕκαστον ὡς ἡ διήγησις ἔχει. Ὅψει τὸν γάμον τῆς Γαλιλαίας καὶ τὰς ὕδρας· τὸν παραλυτικὸν τὴν κλίνην ἐπὶ τῶν ὤμων φέροντα· τὸν τυφλὸν τῷ πηλῷ θεραπευόμενον· τὴν αἱμορροοῦσαν τοῦ κρασπέδου λαμβανομένην· τὴν ἁμαρτωλὸν τοῖς ποσὶν τοῦ Ἰησοῦ προσπίπτουσαν· τὸν Λάζαρον ἐκ τοῦ τάφου πρὸς τὴν ζωὴν ὑποστρέφοντα. Καὶ ταῦτα ποιοῦντες εὐσεβεῖν νομίζουσι καὶ

I include the full excerpt from Asterius' sermon in the footnote. This text has been often understood as describing an actual garment, thus providing information about its iconography. A careful reading of the whole passage, however, suggests to me that Asterius chose miracles that would later on allow him to suggest alternative behavior: one should not display the paralytic, but seek out the ones who are sick; one should not depict the woman with the issue of blood but help the widows. Therefore, I am highly sceptical of the text's value as a source of iconographical information. I doubt that Asterius' contempt for these garments would have allowed for careful observation on his part.

Whatever may be the case, Asterius' sermon is important because it reveals a mentality. As noted by Henry Maguire these garments were decorated in a fashion 'pleasing to God', that is, by wearing them, the faithful hoped to win celestial help and protection. Also, they were 'devised' by the religious people, who also 'picked out the story of the Gospels and hand it over to the weavers.' The personal element in choosing and depicting the scenes from the Gospels is obvious in the surviving textiles. Because a 'popular' iconography was followed, it is difficult sometimes to understand what is represented.

The iconography, especially the often represented saints, found in textiles and other household objects, also has parallels in the wording and decoration of the written charms that, folded and tied, could be easily worn as amulets:

Flee, hateful spirit! Christ pursues you; the son of God and the Holy Spirit have overtaken you. O lord, Christ, son and Word of the living God who heals every disease and every infirmity, also heal and watch over your maiden Joannia whom Anastasia, also called Euphemia, bore and chase away and banish from her every fever and every short of chill — quodidian, tertian, quartan — and every evil. Pray through the intercession of our lady the mother of god, and the glorious archangels, and the holy and glorious apostle and evangelist and theologian John and St. Serenus and Philoxenus and St. Victor and St. Justus and all the saints. O lord god, have I invoked the name that is wonderful and exceedingly glorious and fearful to your adversaries, Amen⁵⁴.

ἱμάτια κεχαρισμένα τῷ Θεῷ ἀμφιέννυσθαι. Ἐμὴν δὲ εἰ δέχονται συμβουλήν, ἐκεῖνα πολλήσαντες τὰς ζώσας εἰκόνας τοῦ Θεοῦ τιμησάτωσαν. Μὴ γράφε τὸν Χριστόν — ἀρκεῖ γὰρ αὐτῷ ἡ μία τῆς ἐνσωματώσεως ταπεινοφροσύνη, ἣν αὐθαιρέτως δι' ἡμᾶς κατεδέξατο —, ἐπὶ δὲ τῆς ψυχῆς σου βαστάζων νοητῶς τὸν ἀσώματον Λόγον περίφερε. Μὴ τοῖς ἱματίοις ἔχε τὸν παραλυτικόν, ἀλλὰ τὸν κείμενον ἄρρωστον ἐπιζήτησον. Μὴ ἰστόρει συνεχῶς τὴν αἰμορροοῦσαν, ἀλλὰ χήραν θλιβμένην ἐλέησον." Datema, *Asterius of Amaseia*, 1.3.1-1.4.4. Mango, *Art of the Byzantine Empire*, 50-51.

⁵⁴ Meyer, *Ancient Christian Magic*, 40-41.

It is very interesting that these spells and the Field museum tunic share a similar expressive language. The obscure meaning of these charms, in which Christ, Isis, apostles, saints, demons, repeated incomprehensible words and magic signs, are blended together, finds its parallel in the strange way some of the scenes are repeated (Nativity and Baptism), or mixed with others. The jumbling of the magic spells is similar to the jumbling of the iconography, as is seen, for example, in the band sleeve, where the Baptism, the Encounter with the Samaritan woman and the Adoration of the Magi are mixed with each other.

The iconography of this tunic, however, allows for a more specific interpretation of its function. Since the decoration consists exclusively of appliquéés, the selection of the themes must reflect the preference of its owner. The majority of the scenes are centered around episodes from the life of the Virgin (Visitation, Nativity, Adoration of the Magi). These images, especially in the case of personal items such as jewellery and clothing, function as evocations of the Virgin's role in the birth and infancy of Christ⁵⁵. As such, they can also be related to issues of childbearing in general. The Visitation is an example of obtaining pregnancy through prayer. The births of Christ and of St. John the Baptist is invoked in magic spells intended to aid conception. The Magi can be seen as bearers of gifts to God, receiving blessings in return. Considering this consistency of themes, therefore, I would like to suggest that the owner of the Chicago tunic was a woman, whose clothes expressed either a desire to bear children or gratitude for having received them.

An additional meaning for this iconography might come from the funeral context in which it was found. The scenes depicted in the tunic underline a basic message, which is the salvation brought to mankind through Jesus' divine intervention on earth. In fact, some of the compositions in the tunic also appear several times in sarcophagi. This is not to imply that these tunics had an exclusively funerary function since Asterius clearly indicates that people wore them in their everyday life. However, one cannot deny their clear soteriological message⁵⁶.

⁵⁵ Maguire, "Cult", 284-285.

⁵⁶ Maguire, "Cult", 284-285. For a different approach to such textiles see Davis, "Divine Body," 335-362. Davis suggested convincingly that, in addition to their prophylactic character, textiles embroidered with New Testament scenes also had a 'christological function.' He argues that tunics, such as the one in Chicago, "became means by which Christological realities were *performed* and *im-personated*" in a ritual context. However, despite the compelling arguments, there is no evidence contemporary to the tunics for such an interpretation.

In conclusion, these simple weavings may not strike us as art objects, but images at that time almost never have an exclusively decorative character. Their importance lies primarily on the information they provide about people's everyday life in the early Christian era, a life full of hopes and fears, permeated by the belief of demons and gods and, ultimately, in the power of images to manipulate both.

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